

Living With Allergies to Animals

Do you suffer from allergies to cats, dogs, or other animals? People with these allergies used be routinely advised to get rid of their companion animals, but, increasingly, doctors are recognizing the importance of the animal-human bond. Eighty-one percent of allergists who live with animals themselves now encourage their allergic patients to find ways to coexist healthily with the animal. (1).

With a little effort, you may be able to allergy-proof your house and your animal and get your allergies under control.

What Are Allergies?

Allergy symptoms can include itching, runny nose, rashes, coughing, wheezing, difficulty breathing, sneezing, swollen sinuses, and headaches.

These symptoms are the body's reaction to a foreign substance that it doesn't tolerate well. Allergy-causing substances (allergens) may be inhaled or they may be ingested or triggered by skin contact. Allergens can be found in animals' hair, dander (dried skin particles), urine, feces, and saliva. They can be carried on clothes and can stay in carpet and furniture for up to six months. (2)

No breed is more or less allergenic than any other. (3) Even within one breed, animals vary widely in their ability to set off allergies. (4) However, female cats seem to be less allergenic than males, and neutered males are less allergenic than un-neutered males. (5)

What You Can Do

First, make sure it's really your animal you're allergic to. Researchers at the University of British Columbia found that only one-half to two-thirds of children who tested positive for allergies to dogs or cats were actually allergic to them. (6).

The main reservoirs of cat allergens are carpets, drapes, upholstered furniture, mattresses, walls, and ceilings, which catch dust and dander. Buy inexpensive vinyl encasing for mattress and box springs, and minimize upholstered furniture. Wash walls, ceilings, blankets, curtains, and throw pillows regularly.

Carpets hold 100 times more allergen than non-porous flooring. (7) Consider replacing carpets with something else (tile, wood, linoleum, or scatter rugs that can be taken up and washed), especially in rooms you spend a lot of time in, such as the bedroom. If you must have carpets, spray them with a product containing nontoxic tannic acid, which helps combat the effects of cat allergens.

Increase your vacuum cleaner's filtration abilities by using special filter replacement bags that help trap particles. Or look for a vacuum cleaner that has a high allergen containment rating.

Declare your bedroom off limits to animals by closing the door at all times. Provide them with their own comfortable beds and blankets instead.

After petting your animal, wash your hands before touching your eyes or face.

If possible, have non-allergic people groom and bathe the animal and clean the litter box. Grooming should be done in a well-ventilated area, like a patio or screened porch.

Beware of dusty or deodorized cat litter, which can be as allergenic as the cat. (8)

An air purifier will help rid the air of allergens. Look for a HEPA (high-efficiency particulate air) filter room air cleaner, which removes almost 100 percent of small allergenic particles. Free-standing cleaners are better than the small, table-top filters. Remember to replace the filters often.

Keep ducts, furnaces, and air conditioner filters clean.

De-insulate your house. Researchers found that a "two-cat super-insulated home--one with every crack closed tight and windows triple-glazed in the name of energy efficiency--had nearly 40 times more cat allergen by weight than an ordinary two-cat home." (9) Circulate air in the house by opening windows every day.

Healthy animals produce less dander. Feed them a high-quality diet twice a day. (10)

Be thorough in cleaning: Search out dust, mold, animal hair. People are rarely allergic to just animals; if you're allergic to an animal, you're probably also allergic to other substances like dust, pollens, or mold. By decreasing other irritants, you'll reduce your overall symptoms.

Avoid tobacco smoke, automobile exhaust, and other irritants that can inflame your airways.

Bathing Cats

Bathing cats and dogs can help reduce allergy symptoms. Several baths may be necessary before you notice an improvement. (11)

To bathe a cat with the minimum amount of discomfort, fill a large pan or sink with one or two inches of lukewarm water. Place a heavy towel in the bottom, so the cat can grip it to feel more secure. Place the cat in the tub, talking in a calm voice as you move a sprinkler over his or her body. Since feline allergens are water soluble, plain water is all you need; don't use a shampoo without checking with your vet first, because cats can have severe reactions to many chemicals. Rinse well and towel dry. Be sure to give your cat a special treat once you're done!

Medication May Be Your Salvation

New medications can make living with allergies and animals much more comfortable. There are a wide variety of nasal sprays, antihistamines, decongestants, and inhalers that can help control allergy symptoms. Your allergist can help you choose the right medication for you.

New immunotherapy or allergy shots are more effective than ever. Studies show that immunotherapy can now be effective in about 80 percent of cases. (Immunotherapy induces a

tolerance to cat allergen by gradually increasing the dose.) (12) Talk to your doctor for more information.

Certain nutritional supplements and herbs can also minimize an allergic response, among them: vitamins A, B6, C, and E; quercetin, a bioflavonoid; flax seed oil, which contains omega-3 fatty acids; MSM (methylsulfonylmethane); and ginkgo. (13) Check with a holistic health care practitioner for specifics.

Sources of allergy control devices and supplies:

Allergy Control Products: 800-422-DUST

Bio-Tech HealthSystems: 800-621-5545

National Allergy Supply: 800-522-1448

Doctors Foster and Smith: 800-826-7206

website: DrsFosterSmith.com

Allerpet: Removes dander and saliva from pet's hair to reduce antigens that cause allergic reactions to your cat. Use weekly for permanent relief. 12 oz bottle. Non-toxic. #8-D-2031 \$5.99

Nature's Miracle Dander & Odor Eliminator: Spray pet's coat with this natural enzyme spray and rub it in. Leaves coat clean and fresh. Removes dander that causes your allergic reactions. 16 oz spray. Non-aerosol pump spray. Safe for cats and dogs. #8D-4968 \$4.99

Quick Cleaning Wipes: Wipe dander off cat's coat and reduce allergic reactions they cause in humans. All natural ingredients in a disposable wipe. Conditions coat.

Beneficial if licked and ingested. Used by several humane societies resulting in pets being kept. Pkg of 5, 2 mo. Supply #8D-3106 \$6.99 Pkg of 15, 6 mo. Supply #8D-3107 \$16.99

Resources:

Berlow, Bruce, M.D., "New Hope for Cat Allergy Sufferers," *Cats*, May 1994. Han, Sallie, "For the Love of Kitty," *Daily News*, June 12, 1995. LeGro, William and Mike McGrath, "Pets and Your Allergies," *Everyday Health Tips*. Ysasi, Edythe, "Many Pet Owners Value Love Over Allergies," *Dallas Times Herald*, March 21, 1986. Proulx, Lawrence G., "When You're Allergic to the One You Love," *The Washington Post*, December 23, 1997. *Everyday Health Tips*, op. cit. *Cats*, op. cit. Shojai, Amy D., "Dander Away!" *Cat Fancy*, August 1992. *Everyday Health Tips*, op. cit. *Cat Fancy*, op. cit. Tomlin, Carolyn Ross, "Allergies and Your Cat: Does Water Make a Difference?" *Cats*, June 1991. *Cats*, op. cit. Langer, Stephen, M.D., "Taking Control of Allergies and Asthma," *Better Nutrition*, April 1998.